HECTOR BERLIOZ
THE MAN AND HIS WRITINGS

BY

ROBERT EMERSON OLIVER

B.Mus., Illinois Wesleyan University, 1938
M.Mus., University of Illinois, 1947
A.M., University of Illinois, 1947

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN FRENCH
IN THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF THE
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Not only has Hector Berlioz already been firmly established as one of France's great composers, but he has also been thoroughly identified with the romantic movement in French music. Such judgments are generally consecrated by posterity alone; Berlioz represents no exception to this phenomenon. However, in addition to being a composer of great brilliance, Berlioz was also a writer possessed of extraordinary literary ability, which posterity has been slow in recognizing.

The famous composer left a vast amount of articles as the result of some forty years of collaboration on a number of leading Parisian journals. During the last twenty-nine years of his journalistic career Berlioz was music critic for the powerful Parisian daily, *Le Journal des Débats.*

During his lifetime Berlioz published four volumes of his collected feuilletons: *Voyage musical en Allemagne et en Italie* (1844), *Les Soirées de l'orchestre* (1852), *Les Grotesques de la musique* (1859), and *A Travers chants* (1862). The composer's only didactic volume, *Grand Traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes* (1844), revised and augmented by *L'Art du chef d'orchestre* in 1856, was based in great part on previously written feuilletons. The same is true of the musician's *Mémoires. Les Musiciens et la musique,* a selection of Berlioz feuilletons from the *Journal des Débats,* was brought out in 1903 by André Hallays.

Berlioz maintained an extensive correspondence throughout his lifetime. All the volumes of this correspondence which have appeared were brought out posthumously. These include the *Correspondance inédite* (1878), *Lettres intimes* (1882), *Briefe von Hector Berlioz an die Fürstin Caroline Sayn-Wittgenstein* (1902), and three volumes of letters (1904-1930): *Les Années romantiques, Le Musicien errant,* and *Au Milieu du chemin.* In addition to various other letters

which have appeared from time to time in periodicals, there are two small collections: *Lettres inédites de Hector Berlioz à Thomas Gounet* (1903) and *Une Page d'amour romantique. Lettres à Mme Estelle F.* (1903).

Besides Berlioz' own writings, there has been a great deal written about the composer. In spite of the fact that a number of biographies and many excellent short articles have appeared, Berlioz, the man, it either very little known or known only in a greatly distorted version, even among generally competent musicologists. This has been due principally to the fact that the highly colored *Mémoires,* which have not always been translated accurately and sympathetically into English, have been implicitly trusted to deliver a true picture. Nor have the recording companies in their biographical and program notes which accompany each pressing of the Frenchman's compositions failed to project a raving, wildly romantic Berlioz as an established phenomenon. The distortion of such a projection engenders a similar distortion in the acceptance of the music. Jacques Barzun, in his monumental, two-volume biography, *Berlioz and the Romantic Century,* published in 1950, combats this presentation according to his own convictions. Bargun's work is of huge proportions, reflecting his subject's tendency toward the gigantic and colossal. Most unfortunately, although the work is invaluable, its size will preclude its attaining widespread popularity, except as a reference work or for specialists in the subject.

In an extensive treatment of Berlioz, reference must be made to his literary capacity. In most instances such reference is perfunctory and desultory. The first lengthy biographies of Berlioz were those of Adolphe Jullien and Edmond Hippeau. It is Hippeau who makes the first real study of Berlioz' newspaper articles and their relation to the *Mémoires.* He also does some probing into the correspondence. Any biography which has appeared or will appear since Boschot's three-volume *L'Histoire d'un romantique. Hector Berlioz* is dependent upon this great factual compilation. Barzun's work is no

exception and its author acknowledges the fact, although he is most explicit in betraying his animus against Boschot. Whereas Boschot is too literal in interpreting much of Berlioz' literary expression and makes little allowance for the composer's basically romantic nature, perhaps Barzun errs by swinging too far in the opposite direction and permitting Berlioz' romanticism and the transiency which characterized much of the nineteenth century in general in France to explain facts too easily. Both works give a general consideration of Berlioz as a writer, Barzun's treatment being more penetrating and understanding, although by no means exhaustive. It is interspersed throughout an extremely detailed study which is basically musicological, in which the author's intense enthusiasm and admiration for his subject are everywhere reflected, and which at times tends toward idealization and fulsome praise.

In 1903, the year of the Berlioz centenary celebration, André Hallays published an article in the *Revue de Paris* entitled "Hector Berlioz, critique musical," which later appeared as the Introduction to the volume of Berlioz' literary criticism which Hallays edited, *Les Musiciens et la musique*. This article reflects a keen appreciation of Berlioz' critical acumen. It is free of the maudlin sentimentality which characterizes much that has been written in defense or explanation of Berlioz. Although it is relatively brief, it stands as the best single study on the subject.

In 1903 also Paul Morillot published a brochure entitled *Berlioz écrivain,* which, though brief, is a sympathetic appraisal of the subject. Although he finds Berlioz "le plus imaginatif et le plus sensible des écrivains," he states that the composer "n'a pas voulu ou bien n'a pas pu faire une oeuvre achevée. Il a écrit par à-coups, au cours d'une période agitée, où son esprit toujours inquiet, son coeur toujours troublé, étaient bien incapables de se fixer."[1] Morillot does not stress that this is due to the fact that Berlioz in all his published volumes was stringing together separate articles which are quite independent of each other, many of which

had been written a number of years previously.

Although Morillot's essay is sympathetic, it seems to err in this very direction. One must remember that the work was conceived especially for the Berlioz centenary and therefore is devoted to what is praiseworthy and commendable in Berlioz' writings. One of Morillot's basic premises can hardly be supported in fact; this is that in Berlioz' "oeuvres de forme exclusivement littéraire... son expression verbale sera libre de toute contrainte..."[2]

Other than somewhat general references to Berlioz' writings in recent biographies of the composer, and a few sporadic articles about the *Mémoires* or Berlioz' musical criticism, no work has appeared which has been devoted exclusively to a study of Berlioz' literary capacities and attainments and to the picture of the man revealed by a study of all types of his writings. The greater number of recent and contemporary writers upon Berlioz, such as Ernest Newman, Cecil Gray, W. J. Turner, T. S. Wotton, Léon Constantin, Guy de Pourtalès, Daniskas, Boschot and Barzun, to mention the better known, are basically more concerned with the musician or the man of the *Mémoires* and the romantic legend, than with the figure of the legend (which Berlioz himself worked to create) as set against the figure which the correspondence reveals.

The purpose of the present study is to uncover the real Berlioz as revealed by a careful reading of his writings (while contrasting that figure with the general conception—based largely on his own creation in his *Mémoires*), and to determine his literary proclivities and merits. To do this, a more than cursory consideration of the composer's biography is expedient. In any attempt to set forth the real Berlioz, it would be entirely futile to try to divorce the purely literary figure from the man and the musician; music is too much an essential element of his very existence.

About the man, as well as about the musician, has grown a highly colorful and highly colored legend which is due in great

part to Berlioz' own literary efforts. Rather than accept wholeheartedly the colorful legend which Berlioz has left in his *Mémoires*, this study attempts to interpret the various influences operating about the musician and then scrutinizes all types of his literary efforts, with especial emphasis on the correspondence, in order to reveal the real character and personality of the man.

These writings have been studied carefully with the object of disclosing any aspect which might differ from the general conception of the man. Berlioz' background, environment, period and personality have been carefully considered in an attempt to understand both his strength and weakness.

Practically all Berlioz scholarship is preeminently musicological. The present study is not. It is therefore not concerned with the relative merits or shortcomings of Berlioz' musical compositions. The musician's writings, as well as commentaries upon the composer and his writings, have been analyzed with the intention of presenting an unbiased portrait of the legendary musician and of developing his very real claim to serious literary consideration.

Hector Berlioz, the inveterate romantic, brilliantly represents that generation which came of age in the Paris of 1930, *Les Jeune-France.* As Théophile Gautier has pointed out, Berlioz in music, Hugo in literature, and Delacroix in painting, form the great *Trinity of Romantic Art.*

The general conception of Berlioz, the man, is that of a "lifelong adolescent," a disheveled, bizarre, wild, raving individual who was absurdly romantic in the most colorful connotations and ramifications of the term. Berlioz himself lent substance to such an interpretation by the self-portrait which he carefully depicted for posterity in his *Mémoires.*

These latter constitute a controlled or restrictive autobiography in which the author tells only what it pleases him to tell. This was contingent to a great extent on two things: first, whether or not the material fitted in with the legend to

which the composer wished to give permanent form, and second, how readily earlier feuilletons could be incorporated into his text.

The composer had begun the *Mémoires* in 1848, at which time much of the material constituting the final text had already appeared in journalistic articles, some as early as twenty years previously. Berlioz went over his text meticulously a number of times, adding a Post-scriptum, Postface, and another final chapter, before sending it to press in December, 1864. Five hundred copies, printed at the author's expense, were published in July, 1865. These copies were stored away by the composer, who stipulated in his will that, after his death, they were to be offered for sale to the general public.

Some time before his death, Berlioz burned all the newspaper clippings and correspondence which he had accumulated during his lifetime. The composer was intent upon perpetuating the legend which he had striven to create throughout his life and to which the *Mémoires* gave final crystallization, a legend with himself the misunderstood and unappreciated genius, a prophet not only unrecognized but also insulted in his own country, as the central figure. This entire legend is part of Berlioz' lifelong campaign to perpetuate his music and his name.

As the years passed and Berlioz saw that his "new" music was not being accepted, he still had supreme confidence that it would triumph eventually. Until such time, he must keep both his name and his music before the public. He felt that an effective means of doing this would be the publication of his *Mémoires*.

These *Mémoires* were often arranged by their author to suit his purpose or for literary effect. The extent of such arrangement is insignificant beyond showing the author's searching after effect and his attempt to present himself as favorably as possible.

The portrait left by Berlioz' voluminous correspondence is

no less flamboyant in many details than that of the *Mémoires* but it is sometimes less flattering and has a truer ring. The intense, unbridled romanticism which is characteristic of the *Mémoires* also pervades the correspondence. One feels that this element in the former is too conscious and heavily charged, with the result that the figure which emerges seems shallow and ruthlessly egocentric. Berlioz' letters show a no less egocentric individual but we are aware that the composer regarded himself as an instrument through which to convey an idealization of his art and he bent all his efforts toward that end. It is secondary that the element of human weakness entered so freely and degenerated into a rather reprehensible and endless self-pity.

The portrait which the *Mémoires* present of Berlioz as a lover does not add to the stature of the man. The correspondence reveals that throughout his life the composer was prey to the obsession of the ideal love, which he was never to know. He was in love with the idea of being in love. It was the search which held significance for him. This explains both his premarital exaltation and fervor and his apathy and seeming callousness after marriage, particularly with regard to Harriet Smithson. The letters reveal that Berlioz was sincere in his devotion to the lifelong search for his ideal love.

The correspondence adds great stature to the figure of Berlioz the man because it attests his sincerity, even in his most wildly romantic exaltation. The letters display a versatile Berlioz: the romantic, upon rare occasion the man stripped of his romanticism, the son and brother at times acutely aware of family ties, the lover, the husband and father weighted down under the exigencies and financial demands of everyday living, the composer, musicologist, and critic, the innovator convinced of his genius and in the last analysis refusing to compromise with his conception of the beautiful and sublime, the misunderstood genius in continuous conflict with a stagnant tradition which resists change, the bizarre figure of the legend set forth in the *Mémoires*. This figure the writer attempts to invest with almost heroic proportions.

In the correspondence we find the genesis of this legend, its development and flowering to the point where Berlioz, as the result of his intense romantic inclination toward self-idealization and self-pity, is gradually led into identifying himself with this legend in his own mind. It is the extension and final development, an overtone, of the youthful romantic's tendency to see in himself the incarnation of a René, a Faust, a Hamlet or a Manfred. Throughout his public and his private life (which the musician often chose to make public), throughout his literary efforts and his personal correspondence, Berlioz will never desist from this romantic self-identification.

In the early correspondence, as in the earliest journalism, Berlioz is principally interested in attracting attention to himself and creating a legend around himself. Through the middle thirties he is still primarily concerned with establishing himself as a personality and with acquiring authority. Then as Berlioz strove to impose his musical ideology, his repeated lack of success, as reflected by the general disregard for his music, drove him to louder complaint and even to invective. This becomes a poison which embitters his later years.

Since Berlioz felt a compelling necessity for communicating his enthusiasms and his hatreds, he indulged that tendency in his letters. Through his correspondence the composer was also able to satisfy his inclination toward making himself the dramatic center around which his world gravitated, as well as satisfying the ego which was constantly wounded by the failure to achieve solid musical success.

It is in these letters that we first see that strong tendency toward a magnification and an amplification of almost everything which Berlioz touches, a characteristic which leads him in art to demand an unheard of number of instrumentalists and vocalists and to conceive prodigiously in terms of the colossal, a characteristic which leads him in his daily living toward an incredible exaggeration and disproportion.

It was natural that Berlioz should turn to writing to aid in the establishment of what he felt should be a lasting fame; he

possessed a marked and unusual talent for literary expression. Early in the development of his chosen career, Berlioz had turned to newspaper writing to create a sympathetic public for his own music, to entrench himself in a powerful position as critic and music arbiter, and to secure himself financially. The greater part of Berlioz' writings are inseparably linked with music, although he deals with many and widely varied aspects of the subject. He was a prolific writer, although he was never interested in literary fame. This extensive literary endeavor can be divided principally into two categories: journalistic articles and personal correspondence. All the books of Berlioz' musical criticism and the greater part of the *Mémoires* are merely selective compilations of previous journalistic articles.

An intensely romantic sensibility permeates Berlioz' literary as well as his musical expression. His very personal style of literary expression is characterized by a magnificent command of his native tongue, wide knowledge, an inquisitive intellect, a keen power of observation, striking originality, self-confidence, an innate dramatic sense, an acute appreciation of antithesis and contrast, an ability to inject his own personality without becoming obtrusive, a sparkling wit, and above all, the rare gift of the born story-teller.

Berlioz' literary style mirrors the man himself. It is a style calculated to attract readers and is often greatly concerned with direct appeal. Berlioz makes extensive use of punning, parodying, and witticisms which are occasionally in questionable taste.

Alongside Berlioz' claim to immortality in music must be placed his claim to serious literary consideration. This claim to recognition as an important figure in the world of French men of letters is postulated upon very real premises:

1) In Berlioz' writings we find one of the great and most authentic expressions of French romanticism.

2) His feuilletons and correspondence constitute a

history and vivid presentation of the Parisian musicial milieu of his time.

3) He must be regarded as a paragon in the field of French musical criticism.

4) His literary contributions to the field of musicology occupy an important position in the history of French music and have stood the test of time.

5) His librettos are models of the form in the French language.

Berlioz' literary production, while not establishing him in the foremost rank of French men of letters, nevertheless entitles him to a respected place in the field, well ahead of any other of France's recognized composers. It is indeed fitting that *Les Jeune-France*, Paris, 1830, should find such consummate expression in the literary efforts of the inveterate romantic, Hector Berlioz.

FOOTNOTE

[1] Paul Morillot. *Berlioz écrivain.* Grenoble: Allier frères, 1903. p. 18.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 1.

VITA

Robert Emerson Oliver was born July 20, 1916 at Danville, Illinois. After graduating from Danville High School in 1934, he entered the School of Music, Illinois Wesleyan University, and received the degree of Bachelor of Music, with a major in piano, from that institution in June, 1938. From 1938-1942 he taught music and commercial subjects in various high schools in Wisconsin. He was Supervisor of Music in the Public Schools of Lancaster, Wisconsin at the time of his induction into the Army of the United States in 1942. He served with the 94th Infantry Division in the American and European Theaters. He attended the University of Grenoble (France) during the summer of 1945. Upon discharge from the Army, he enrolled in the Graduate School of the University of Illinois in March, 1946, and received the degree of Master of Music in June, 1947, and the degree of Master of Arts, in French, in October, 1947. He spent the summer of 1949 in France, where he did research in Paris, Grenoble and La-Côte-Saint-André. In addition to pursuing his graduate work, he has held a part-time Assistantship in the Department of French at the University of Illinois since 1948. He is a member of Pi Kappa Lambda, national honorary and scholastic music fraternity, and Pi Delta Phi, national honorary and scholastic fraternity for students of French.